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***Written Testimony for the Comm. on Veterans' Affairs,
Conn. Gen. Assembly, on SB918***

Senator Cabrera, Representative Boyd, Senator Maroney, Representative Napoli, and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Danya Keene. I am an Associate Professor at the Yale School of Public Health.

I submit this written testimony in support of Proposed Senate Bill 918, which will expand the definition of veteran in Connecticut to include those veterans whom the Department of Veterans Affairs ("VA") has recognized as "honorable for VA purposes". This bill is about fundamental fairness and dignity for Connecticut's veterans.

Many veterans serve in the U.S. Military only to be separated with a less-than-honorable discharge status because of behavior that actually resulted from unaddressed trauma, mental illness, or the effects of discrimination. Often, even minor misconduct can lead to separation from service with an other-than-honorable ("OTH") discharge, which is a profound social stigma that carries with it the forfeiture of significant earned federal and state benefits.

As a public health researcher, I can attest to the significant adverse health implications of this exclusion. In my particular, one important benefit at stake for veterans with OTH is access to VA housing benefits. My own research at the Yale Health and Housing Lab documents the numerous health consequences associated with lack of access to affordable and stable housing. Without stable and affordable housing, participants in our studies struggled to manage chronic health conditions such as heart failure and type 2 diabetes. They experienced profound psychosocial stress and anxiety that likely contributed to mental and physical health problems. Currently, there is currently no state in this country where a full-time minimum wage job is

sufficient to affordably rent a two- bedroom apartment. Furthermore, only one in five eligible households receive federal rental subsidies that are intended to assist those without access to stable affordable housing. VA benefits are critical to addressing this gap and protecting veteran health and well-being.

In recognition that sometimes a veteran may have served honorably, faithfully, and meritoriously, despite very limited misconduct, the VA has a built-in system for deciding when OTH veterans should actually be considered “honorable for VA purposes” and allowed access to federal veteran’s benefits. The state of Connecticut does not have a similar system for determining which veterans may, in fact, have served honorably despite their discharge status. Currently, the state of Connecticut often denies benefits to veterans even if they are deemed honorable for VA purposes in the federal system. SB 918 would remedy that. With this proposed law, Connecticut would grant access to state benefits for those veterans who have proved they are honorable under federal law.

By passing SB 918, Connecticut would make its state veterans benefit system more just and inclusive. This expansion would reflect an ethic of fundamental fairness: if a veteran with a OTH discharge has succeeded in proving to the VA that their service was honorable despite their discharge status, then Connecticut should recognize that status as well. This change would also be simple and efficient to enact. It would require no adjudication by the state benefit system, and would merely recognize the merit of the VA’s existing, extensive adjudication process.

For all these reasons, I support SB 918 and I urge this legislature pass this bill into law. By expanding our state’s definition of who counts as a “veteran” to include those veterans recognized as honorable by the VA, we can create a more just and inclusive state benefit system.